Average intellectuals

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Intellectuels Moyens

new translation of Jacques Le Goff's

Intellectuals in the Middle Ages

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(with introduction and critical apparatus)

To my colleagues at the University of Vienna, one of the Medieval universities described in *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, and intellectual centers of the world in the 1930s of the “The School of Vienna at Prague”. The role of history : to put ourselves in distant pasts, to remind us of our times, “reflection of a reflection”.

As to “average” (*moyen*), everyday academics living in the 21st century as these scholars did in the 12th, they will perhaps, one day, too, undergo the same transitions described in the following pages.

The transition from monastic life to ‘world of the city’

PREFACE

It might seem a little presumptuous to publish again today a history book, exactly as it was seventy years ago – with no modifications. But, I do not believe that its descriptions of the scholarly and academic world of the Middle Ages are ‘past its use-by date’. It seems to me, on the contrary, that there are great resemblances, and that its central point of view remains ours.

Beginning with the word “*intellectual*”, whose interest to us lies in the fact that it shifts our attention from institutions, and their buildings, to people, flesh and blood, from ideas to social structures – practices and mental structures, of placing this phenomenon of universities in the Middle Ages inside a bigger history, that of the “*longue duree*”, and sociology.

The fashion of “intellectual history”, a fashion fad.

If, like in any good comparative approach, we do not separate sociology from history, the anachronism of “intellectual” is justified and useful. The point of view of the sociologist enhances that of the historian : the sociologist establishes coherence of “models”, “categories” and general “types”, while historians highlight change, turns and breaches, and differences, and ruptures.

This notion of “intellectual”, I borrowed from modern history, the sociology and epistemology of our world since the 19th c.. I certainly did not intend to give myself over to a theoretical analysis of this concept.

It is no coincidence that all the best studies on intellectuals have come out of the Italy of Gramsci [and Marx]. (...)

I am relieved, to come back to “my intellectuals”, of having seen a wonderful study on the birth of the University of Modena, the second Italian university after Bologna.

Giovanni Santini, referring to my book of 1957, has posited much better than I ever did :

The birth of the “intellectual”, as a social category, a new sociological type, presupposes the division of labor seen in urban spaces, just like university [scholarly] institutions presuppose a common cultural, scientific ground; in which these new “cathedrals of knowledge” are able to emerge, and flourish, and confront themselves.

The division of labor... The city... New institutions...

— These intellectual “intellectual histor[ians]” – doubly imprisoned – are like the fashion victims of our days.

— Like telescopes are to microscopes, and sniper rifles to bombs.

— And, certainly no “diatribes”, like a certain *dumb, dumb* historian of science from Yale, who said he could go into “long diatribes”, and managed the extraordinary feat of a 3-hour long, real or imagined, presentation on errors in calculations among the scribes of Mesopotamia. – out of which came nothing, other than he was the error himself.

— “People in the city have peculiar tastes”, said Reed, who knew what he was talking, and had lived many lives contrary to certain others.

— *Giovanni’s Room*. (In the “tolerant” Middle Ages of Christianity, they pored gasoline on people like James Baldwin and Michel Foucault, and lit the match too.)

A common cultural ground : that was common to all of Christianity, in opposition to the fragmentation, political and geographical, characteristic of the High Middle Ages.

These were, in short, the needed and essential steps and characteristics that made, and had made possible, the transition towards and emergence of the new intellectual landscape of the turn of the 12th and 13th c..

Indeed, **the link of the intellectual to the city played a decisive role. – in the Middle Ages.**

The evolution of scholarly and academic practices can only be understood in that context : the urban revolutions, of the 10th to 13th c..

The divide [cleavage] between the monastic school, reserved to monks (in training), and the urban school, in theory open to all, including to those who would remain agnostic [laic], is fundamental.

But, I should have done more to highlight the attraction of urban schools and spaces on the monastic world of these scholastic monks.

If, ‘5 by 5’, the orders of the Beggars – despite the debate launched by Saint Francis of the Franciscans – had right away joined the ‘world of the city’ and its schools, this was not so for all :

Even more significant is the conversion of certain average intellectuals found in the ‘monastic world’, e.g. Cistercians, to academic teaching.

They did so by founding colleges for [the sins of] their orders in the academic cities of the 13th c. onwards.

Urban, these new intellectuals :

These new Men of some profession, or trade, have – just like merchants, as they are in facts “merchants of words”, as others are “sellers (ideologues) of times” – to fight the clichés of a science that is not for sale, being a gift of God.

Following the American historian of the Middle Ages, Gaines Post I have highlighted the professional character and nature of these new masters and scholar-students.

In addition to the great books of Pearl Kibre, a series of studies have shown precisely the ‘material conditions of possibility’ – material, technical, if not technological, law, and else – of the academic profession.

In that way, I should have insisted more on the revolutionary role played by academic curricula in recruiting governing [government] elites.

The Western World had only known three modes of access to power up to that point :

1. Birth, the most important.

2. Riches, very secondary until the 13th c.. With the excep-

— Pure Marx, Durkheim, Panofsky.

— If you do not understand the relevance of passages such as these to our present times, we cannot help you, you must help yourself.

— In fact, the original says “*milieu monastique*”. And, we have come to know one too many a historian of science who likes to talk about “milieu” a little bit too much – the “milieu” of scientists evoked by Canguilhem – but had never come to understand hers, herself. She liked talking about “milieu” a lot, but so “Moyen” herself... We warned you : you do us violence, we will return it a thousand times.

— “*the orders of the beggars*”... Boy oh boy, this text is too much. ‘5 by 5’ – that was us.

— And, if you do not understand these lines, for what they are, you are really helpless.

— Harvard, MIT, Stanford, Penn ...

tion of Rome in the Antiquity.

3. And, finally, though marginally, ‘election’ by luck : of limited reach, in Greek towns of the Antiquity.

The Christian Church had – in theory –

The Church had – in theory – opened access to knowledge and honorary ecclesiastic pleasures, functions to all.

But, in reality, it did else :

Episcopal, abbatial functions and ecclesiastic dignities were largely, only the pleasures of the rich, and the powerful of the time : the Nobility, as pointed out.

The young nobles and soon-to-be young bourgeois took most of these jobs.

The system of the academic world, did, to few, enable a real social ascension. Few only.

The analysis of reality, and our changing times goes beyond the anecdotal : as sociologists we draw up, create general types.

At the very bottom – or top, we should say perhaps – of this professional, social and institutional evolution, was one goal :

Power.

— *Spratacus* (1960).

— Rappers. Basketball players. Movie stars. NFL stars. Soccer players. And, various TV, media personalities too.

— Theory vs practice. Promises vs. acts. Ideas vs. beliefs. – in other words, the material, including mental, and metal structures mentioned at the very beginning.

— The upper-classes’ offspring. The 1 to 10%. (e.g. Mark Zuckerberg or Sheryl Sandberg)

—. 1993. *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*. Wiley-Blackwell.

—. 2014. *Les intellectuels au Moyen Age*. Points.